The term **Black Reconstruction** refers to the actions and activities of both black and white Americans in the period immediately after the Civil War. It involved the transformation of Southern political, economic, and social institutions in a manner consistent with the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, which collectively established black freedom and equality. Many historians define Black Reconstruction as spanning the years from 1863 (the year of the Emancipation Proclamation, which made possible widespread black military participation in the Civil War) through 1877 (the year of the national political agreement to remove federal troops from the South). However, significant political and other Reconstruction activity by African Americans continued at the local and state levels beyond 1877.

The rebuilding of Southern society and the political reintegration of the South into the nation after the Civil War is referred to more generally simply as Reconstruction. Unfortunately, for the first half of the twentieth century, scholarly and historical attention focused almost exclusively on the actions of whites, both in the South and in the North, and ignored the immense contributions of African Americans. Moreover, to the extent that white historians considered the activities of African Americans at all, for much of the twentieth century they adopted the white supremacist views that Columbia University professor William Dunning and his followers held at the turn of the nineteenth century. These historians denigrated Reconstruction as a “mistake” precisely because black Americans briefly attained some political power in the regions of their former bondage. This view was reproduced in popular form by the film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the book on which it was based, *The Clansman* (1902), both of which stigmatized African Americans and lauded white terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. The history of Reconstruction became a principal means by which whites, in both the South and the North, manipulated historical memories in order to reify a post-slavery racialism.

A dissenting view of Reconstruction that recognized African-American achievements was preserved and developed by some scholars, most notably W. E. B. Du Bois, whose magisterial 1935 work on the period was titled *Black Reconstruction*, and John Hope Franklin, whose *From Slavery to Freedom* was first published in 1947 and is still widely read some four million copies later. Thus, the term **Black Reconstruction** operates at two levels: (1) it focuses on the overlooked contributions of black Americans to this period in American history; and (2) it presents a corrective to the racism of first decades of the twentieth century by more fairly analyzing the achievements and failures of both black and white actors during Reconstruction.

### THE INITIAL STAGES

One can trace the beginnings of Black Reconstruction to the service of some 160,000 former slaves and 40,000 free African Americans who served as soldiers in the Union during the Civil War. These soldiers not only provided the manpower essential to the North’s victory, they also staked an undeniable claim to be transformed from a state of slavery into full citizenship after the war. Many of these former soldiers became integral to the black and interracial civic and political organizations in the South. This story is evident, for example, in the experience of Abraham Galloway, who had been born a slave near Wilmington, North Carolina, and who may have been inspired by the writings and ideas of David Walker, a free black who was also from Wilmington. Saving money as a brick mason beyond that demanded by his owner, Galloway escaped to an African-American abolitionist community in Ontario, Canada. When the Civil War began, he returned to the United States and served as a spy in the intelligence service of the Union army in eastern North Carolina. In recruiting other blacks for the Union army, Galloway was seen as a natural leader and was made a member of a delegation of blacks who met with President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 on the issue of black suffrage. Galloway attended the massive National Convention of Colored Citizens held in Syracuse, New York, in 1864 to consider the postwar situation of African Americans. He also started state and local chapters of the Equal Rights League. These leagues served as political and civic associations throughout the country, fighting for equal civil, political, and social rights for black citizens. They also represented, along with black churches, schools, and other organizations, the framework of a burgeoning African-American civic life.

Galloway and other leaders, such as Tunis Campbell in Georgia, soon discovered that the resistance of most white Southerners to citizenship claims by blacks was swift and violent. First, in 1865 and 1866, the white South passed the “Black Codes,” separate laws modeled in part on the antebellum laws restricting free blacks in both the North and South. These laws restricted basic contract and property rights for African Americans, imposed particularly severe criminal and vagrancy punishments, and otherwise established a legal basis for second-class citizenship. In turn, these reactionary laws radicalized the Republican Party in Congress, which passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866 to outlaw the Black Codes. Then, in 1867, the Congress passed Reconstruction legislation that required black suffrage as a condition of readmission of the former Confederate states to the Union.

What former Confederates could not achieve through law, however, they sought to gain by violence. Thus began, in earnest, the white terrorist or vigilante organizations such as Red Shirts, the Regulators, the Knights of the White Camelia, and, above all, the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan engaged in extreme violence, often against blacks who, in the words of one former Confederate, had attained some “status in society” through property holdings, labor or political activism, or general social standing. In the face of such violence, both Galloway and Campbell helped form black militias that provided some level of protection against white terrorism. For a time, the freedpeople depended on the federal government as a means of protection against white Southern violence and legal manipulation. The Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands, or the Freedmen’s Bureau, had been established on March 3, 1865, to provide basic necessities to freed slaves and refugees in the South. At first there had been some hope that congressmen committed to black rights, including Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner, would be able to implement land reform through the Joint resolution of the then common phrase, “forty acres and a mule.” President Andrew Johnson and his conservative allies in Congress, however, eliminated this essential reform, and the bureau thereafter concentrated on labor, education, public welfare, and access to justice. Although the Freed-men’s Bureau often supported white Southern landowners in attempts to secure black labor, it also provided basic food, medical aid, education, and legal protection to many African Americans in the South. In addition, the bureau presented African Americans with opportunities for leadership as officers and agents. John Mercer Langston, for example, served as a national officer in the bureau after the war. Langston went on to establish the law department at Howard University (the school was named after the head of the bureau, General O. O. Howard), serve as the school’s acting president, become a member of Congress from Virginia, and represent the United States as minister to Haiti.
Tunis Campbell had also served in the Freedmen's Bureau, where he was in charge of the initial land redistribution in the Sea Island region of Georgia. When President Johnson pardoned former Confederates in 1865 and allowed former slaveholders to reclaim their land, Campbell organized the black community and purchased land to better secure the rights, property, and safety of his community. Like many other black leaders from both the North and the South, Campbell then became a leader in Southern state and local Republican politics. With the support of congressional legislation and federal troops, many Southern states were required to implement African-American suffrage in their reconstructed legislatures and state constitutional conventions. People such as Campbell and the Reverend Henry McNeal Turner served prominently in the Reconstruction state constitutional conventions, and many black veterans and officers of the Freedmen's Bureau served in the conventions and the Reconstruction legislatures.

Through these interracial political bodies, many Southern states ratified the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which would likely not have been ratified without black political participation, both as voters and as convention delegates. Several Southern states also passed broad legislative reform programs that included laws desegregating public accommodations, founding and supporting public schooling, and reforming criminal laws and punishments. Moreover, the composition of these legislatures reflected the broad civil society that had formed so quickly in Southern black communities. Of the African-American members of these reconstructed state legislatures, over one hundred were ministers and seventy were teachers, attesting to the importance of religious organizations and education in the civil and political life of the black South. This is evident, for instance, in the career of Reverend Turner, a South Carolina free man. Turner was trained as a minister and appointed by President Lincoln as the Union army’s first black chaplain. Like Tunis Campbell, Turner worked for the Freedmen’s Bureau in Georgia after the war. He later founded the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Georgia and served in the state legislature until he was expelled without cause.

BLACK POLITICAL POWER

Federal assistance also occasionally helped blacks combat white violence. Extensive Klan violence forced the hand of congressional Republicans, who, under the authority of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, enacted federal legislation to enable federal prosecution of the perpetrators. Black members of Congress, including the first African-American U.S. senator, Hiram Revels of Mississippi, and the first African-American member of the House of Representatives, Joseph Rainey of South Carolina, together praised this legislation as essential to protecting freedom and citizenship. In South Carolina, federal prosecution of the Klan under this law helped curb Klan violence and made it safer for the black majority in the state to hold and exercise political power. Indeed, this combination of federal enforcement of the laws and the initiative of black citizens—in politics, self-protection, and community organization—briefly appeared to be a viable counterweight to Southern white efforts to reimpose the slave system. In South Carolina, for instance, African-American politicians such as Rainey, Robert Smalls, and Robert B. Elliot were able to win election to the U.S. House of Representatives, African Americans held a majority in the state house of representatives for several years, and African Americans served as Speakers of the House for four years (including Elliot, from 1874–1876).

Blacks also saw significant political success in Louisiana, where Oscar J. Dunn, P. B. S. Pinchback, and Caesar Antoine served as lieutenant governors for most of the Reconstruction era. Pinchback even served as America’s first black governor for a brief period. In Mississippi, African Americans held positions as lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and superintendent of education, and John R. Lynch served as Speaker of the House and was subsequently elected to Congress. All told, twenty-two African Americans served in Congress as a result of Reconstruction, and more than 600 African Americans served in state legislatures throughout the South, mostly from 1868 through 1877.

Black political power was also felt on the local level, where African Americans held numerous positions, such as sheriffs, justices of the peace, city aldermen, and county commissioners. Indeed, it was perhaps at this everyday level that the immediacy of racial equality had the greatest impact on whites and blacks alike. For black Southerners, the prospect of having black local officials available for dispensing government assistance or everyday justice made real the hope of equal citizenship. For many white Southerners, on the other hand, the same situation seemed to turn reality upside-down. Many whites viewed this period not as an experiment in racial equality but as an era of “Negro domination” in which blacks seemed to exercise power at all levels of government. For these whites of the postwar South, there could be no racial equality; any and all exercises of power by African Americans amounted to “domination.” On the other hand, as long as the Republicans saw black suffrage as clearly aligned with their own political interests, federal support for suffrage was possible. Indeed, even after the Compromise of 1877, national Republicans continued for about fifteen years to support, albeit in vain, federal actions and legislation to protect black suffrage.

As part of this battle for black equality and power during Reconstruction, African Americans throughout the South developed newer strategies for claiming rights through demonstrations and protests. In New Orleans, for instance, African Americans and white supporters marched in July 1866 in favor of suffrage in what has been described as the first American civil rights march. The New Orleans Race Riot of 1866 erupted when the marchers were met by an angry, violent white mob. Other forms of protest included successful sit-ins on streetcars in Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans in 1867. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which gave private persons a right of action against owners of segregated public accommodations, also inspired protest actions and litigation. Black workers also engaged in strikes for better working conditions, both in the early years of Reconstruction and in the waning days of the late 1870s into the 1880s when a national union, the Knights of Labor, supported black workers in the South.

THE END OF RECONSTRUCTION

Still, despite these early achievements and the tireless work of people such as Campbell, Elliot, and Rainey, conservative whites were often able to defeat or overturn Republican reform programs. Indeed, such a coalition of whites in Georgia denied the right of black legislators who had been elected in 1868 to take their seats (Georgia legislators also refused to ratify the Fifteenth Amendment). White democrats used election fraud and violence to recapture political power. The most notorious of these events occurred in Colfax, Louisiana, where, on Easter Sunday, April 13, 1873, armed whites attacked blacks in an effort to unseat local black officeholders after a disputed local election. Over 105 blacks were killed in the violence.

The growing unwillingness of the federal government and the national Republican Party to support African Americans in the South in the 1870s culminated in the election of 1876. The presidential contest between the Republican candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes, and the Democrat Samuel J. Tilden remained undecided after election day, with the electors from three southern states—South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida—in dispute. As part of a political compromise, Hayes was awarded the electors and the presidency, but Republicans agreed to remove all troops from the South. Blacks in the South were left without even minimal federal protection, and white Democrats were able to regain and secure full political power in the ensuing decade.
While the Compromise of 1877 marked the sharpest sign that Reconstruction was over, its full demise took several more years. In 1883, the U.S. Supreme Court extinguished the embers of Reconstruction when it ruled, in the Civil Rights Cases, that the federal Civil Rights Act of 1875, the last of the federal Reconstruction Acts that sought to protect civil rights in public accommodations, was unconstitutional. In this and related cases, the Supreme Court ensured that the Constitution would be transformed from a document creating equal citizenship to a roadblock to freedom. Still, for a period of about fifteen years, African Americans in certain areas of the South maintained some level of political power, particularly where they were able to join with populist white politicians, and where the law had not yet reverted to the Jim Crow regime of legally compelled segregation that had been implemented before Reconstruction under the Black Codes. The achievements of Reconstruction thus lingered for several years, finally falling away near the turn of the century with the federal acceptance of legal segregation in Plessy v. Ferguson and the complete implementation of disenfranchisement by the start of the twentieth century.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR FUTURE RESISTANCE

This defeat of Reconstruction and its promise of racial equality and equal citizenship has led many people to see that era as a tragic failure. W. E. B. Du Bois famously wrote in 1935: “the slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.” While such a conclusion is correct in terms of the fundamental access of African Americans to political and economic power, one should not forget that some of the structures built by blacks, and some of the hopes fostered by the experiences of Black Reconstruction, lived on. Even as federal and moderate white support for Reconstruction waned in the 1870s, and as African Americans lost many of the political and economic gains they had achieved during Reconstruction, many blacks continued to build communities and maintain some political power. With the resistance of whites to interracial politics and society plainly evident, many African Americans, including Turner and Campbell, emphasized black-centered communities and organizations. Some even formed African American towns—such as Nicodemus, Kansas, and Langston, Oklahoma—which were started by African Americans after the end of Reconstruction in 1877 as part of a black emigration known as the Exoduster movement.

In response to white efforts to impose racialism on the southern polity, and thus extend the race ideas of slavery into the postslavery world, black Southerners sought to redefine an identity for themselves. While some did this by moving out of the South, for most African Americans it was the continued building of strong black communities, rather than mass emigration, that kept alive the hopes and possibilities of Reconstruction. The foundations built during Reconstruction—foundations in black education, black churches, and black political and community organizations—would continue to provide support to African Americans in the South throughout the long years of Jim Crow.

The ways in which the Reconstruction era allowed for the building of foundations in black communities can be seen in the development of a parallel civil society within black communities, a process that began during Reconstruction and continued throughout the Jim Crow era. For example, in Reconstruction-era Richmond, Virginia, mass meetings held at local black churches to celebrate the end of slavery in 1865 quickly transformed into the political, educational, and public-assistance organizations that acted and advocated on behalf of African Americans throughout Reconstruction. Particularly important to this struggle was the contribution of black women, who were fully engaged in the activities and ideas of these organizations. Women even formed or took part in militias and carried arms in an effort to support and protect black communities and the exercise of freedom, including the protection of black men attempting to vote in the face of white violence and threats. Ultimately, despite the overwhelming failure of Reconstruction to realize equal citizenship, it was the creation of these frameworks for the development of black communities that maintained the promise of Reconstruction. Through these efforts, African Americans would attain the education, begin the economic development, and build the supportive communities that would be necessary to eventually challenge Jim Crow.

To what extent was Reconstruction effective in improving life and liberty for African Americans?

Write a complete thesis in response to this prompt. Use your formula!